

# The Comradeship of Whitman

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American Intellectual History (267)

April, 1999

In September of 1863 Walt Whitman wrote a letter from Washington, D.C. to a friend in New York City. In this letter, he described his volunteer experiences in the numerous Civil War hospitals around Washington. The friend to whom Whitman wrote was Nat Bloom, a drinking buddy and a part of what Whitman playfully came to call the Fred Gray association. The way in which Whitman related to this close-knit group of friends is very telling about his view of comradeship and love. These two elements are crucial to Whitman's conception of his own spirituality.

Walt Whitman was born to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor on May 31, 1819. He was the second son in what was to become a family of five children. His family moved to Brooklyn, New York when Whitman was four. Whitman's father, though trained as a carpenter, had continually poor luck in maintaining a job throughout Whitman's childhood. As a result Whitman's family moved continually during his youth as one after another of house mortgages ran out. He attended a public school in which he was considered "a good natured boy...but not otherwise remarkable." At this school he learned only the very basics of reading and writing. However, Whitman also attended St. Ann's Sunday school, which helped to further his education. He took his first job at age eleven as an errand boy and minor clerk for the law office of James B. Clark and his son Edward. Edward took a liking to Whitman, and it was he who gave Whitman a subscription to a circulating library. According to Whitman this gift was the most important event in his life at that time. From his job at the law offices, Whitman moved from job to job in New York until in 1831 he entered the world of printing and journalism, in the form of the printing office of the Long Island Patriot.

Years later, in 1862, he was still in New York, having just lost a job the year before at the Daily Times, due to his insistence of writing articles on controversial subjects such as prostitution. While reading over a newspaper casualty list of the battle of Fredericksburg, Whitman saw listed "First Lieutenant G.W. Whitmore, company D." The Whitman family felt sure that this was Whitman's brother George. They may have known the names of the other officers of his company, thus deducing that it had to be him. At any rate, Whitman immediately set off to Washington to find him. It was at this point, searching through the Washington army hospitals, that Whitman saw first-hand the effect of the carnage of the war. While in Washington, he ran into a former publisher of his, Charley Eldridge. Eldridge then had a job in the army paymaster's office. He offered to assist Whitman if he should need it. In order to find his brother, Whitman continued on to Falmouth, Virginia. He found

George in a camp hospital with only a minor flesh wound. While at Falmouth Whitman first discovered the joy to be found in comforting the wounded. He eventually traveled back up to Washington with a convoy of wounded soldiers.

Back in Washington, Whitman contacted Eldridge, who managed to get him a job in the paymaster's office as a copyist for a few hours a day. In his letter to Nat Bloom, Whitman mentions this job as keeping him quite content. It allowed him to spend most of his hours visiting the soldiers in the surrounding hospitals. His superior was the paymaster Major Hapgood, whose name can be seen on the postscript that Whitman adds to his letter. In giving comfort to the dying, and nurturing the wounded, Whitman found his true vocation. In this letter to his friends back in New York he speaks of the joy this nurturing role gives him.

Nat Bloom was one of those in the circle of friends to whom Whitman wrote. Not much is known about Nat Bloom. Historians know that in the 1850's he was a part of an informal group of friends that congregated around Whitman, who jokingly called these young men the Fred Gray Association. The name was from one of the members, a young man named Fred Gray, the son of a doctor, who went on to become a doctor himself in the Civil War. Whitman met these young men at Pfaff's, a cafe and drinking club that was fashionable among New York's bohemian crowd of actors, writers, and artists. Little is known about the men who made up the Fred Gray Association. They were drinking friends and were relatively literate. It is to these men that Whitman asks to be remembered to in his letter. Fred Gray is known by historians, as is Hugo Fritsch, who was the son of the Austrian consul. Some of the others named in the letter, such as Chauncy and Raymond are mere names we know nothing about. Nat Bloom became a successful merchant, and eventually had a store on Broadway. He is later listed as an importer, but is unmentioned after 1900.

In his letter to Nat Bloom Whitman speaks of his young friends, both from Pfaff's and from the hospitals, in terms of warmth and endearment. This is characteristic of Whitman. He had a tendency to adopt a "mothering" tone towards these young men, whom, he felt, depended on him. It was during the Civil War, during his time spent in the hospitals that Whitman fully realized his need to nurture and his need for close comradeship. He realized that by fulfilling these needs he created a sort of spiritual wholeness that was necessary for his existence. Whitman desperately needed love and comradeship, even more importantly he needed to be able to give it. This need is shown in the letter, as he tells Nat how deeply moved he is to be able to give love and caring to the soldiers. By being able to give this sort of love, Whitman experienced a wholeness of spirit that he had never known before. Once he realized that he needed this nurturing activity in his life in order to be fulfilled spiritually, Whitman deliberately went seeking it, in camp hospitals and among friends. It is this kind of search for spiritual wholeness that marks Whitman as a transcendentalist.

Whitman was aware of the Transcendentalist movement. He had heard Emerson lecture several times in 1842, and he felt deeply moved by his ideas. However, while Emerson

valued the emotions as a way to become one with God and the universe, Whitman carried emotion even farther into the realm of the physical. Emerson, however rather disapproved of the extent to which Whitman carried it. He urged Whitman to cut his explicitly sexual *Enfans d'Adams* group of poems from publication, as he believed it would hurt the circulation of the work. Whitman disagreed. His own personality called for expressing his sentiment, no matter whether love between mere friends or sexual love. In this he was more similar to Carlyle, whom he had also read in the late 1840's and instantly loved. He "adored Carlyle's extravagance, his wild claims, his passion." This sort of emotion is evident in the letter in which Whitman uses intimate, endearing language when inquiring after the members of the Fred Gray Association. Whitman also uses a passionate, though muted, language in recalling the joy he felt at being needed by the wounded soldiers. This passion was part of his nature, and manifested itself in his poetry, and in his letters. Everything he experienced he felt very deeply, indeed in a very Emersonian way. His feelings flowed through him, often spilling out to affect those he came into contact with. Thus it was that Whitman could feel his nursing experience affect him very profoundly, and the fulfilling impact it had on his spiritual growth as a whole. Because the spiritual Whitman and the emotional Whitman are so closely linked, it is possible to see both aspects of his character in this letter.

## Transcription of a letter from Walt Whitman to Nat Bloom

[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department; gift of Charles A. Brown, class of 1879.]

Washington

September 5 1863

Dear Nat

I wish you were here if only to enjoy the bright & beautiful weather we are having here, now for about two weeks - then it is sufficiently cool & the air buoyant & inspiriting-

Dear friend how long it is since we have seen each other, since those pleasant meetings & those hot spiced rums & suppers & our dear friends Gray & Chauncy & Russell & [Fritschy ?] too, (who for a while at first used to sit so silent,) & Perkins & our friend Raymond - how long it seems - how much I enjoyed it all[.?] - What a difference it is with me here - I tell you Nat my evenings are frequently spent in scenes that make a terrible difference - for I am still a hospital visitor, there has not passed a day for months, (or at least not more than two) that I have not been among the sick & wounded, either in hospitals or down in camp - occasionally here I spend the evenings in hospital - the experience [sic] is a profound one, beyond all else & touches me personally, egotistically, in unprecedented ways[-?] I mean the way often the amputated, sick, [sometimes?] dying soldiers cling & cleave to me as it

were as a man overboard to a plank, & the perfect content they have if I will remain with them sit on the side of the cot awhile, some youngsters often, & caress them etc - It is delicious to be the object of so much love & reliance & to do them such good, soothe & pacify torments [,] wounds etc - you will doubtless see in what I have said the reason I continue so long in this kind of life - as I am entirely on my own hook too.

Life goes however quite well with me here - I work a few hours a day at copying etc. occasionally [sic] write a newspaper letter, & make enough money to pay my expenses - I have a little room, & live a sort of German or Parisian student life - always get my breakfast in my room (have a little spirit lamp) & [rub?] on free & happy enough, untrammelled by business, for I make what little employment I have suit my moods - walk quite a good deal & in this weather the rich & splendid environs of Washington are an unfailing fountain to me - go down the river or off into Virginia once in a while- all around us here are forts, by the score- great ambulance & teamsters' camps etc - these I go to, - some have little hospitals, I visit, etc [etc?]

Dear Nat, your good & friendly letter came safe, & was indeed welcome - I had not thought you had forgotten me, but I wondered why you did not write - what comfort you must take out there in the country by the rivers [-?] I have read your letter many times, as I do from all my dear friends & boys there in New York - Perkins lately wrote me a first-rate letter & I will reply to it soon - I wish to see you all very much- I wish you to give my love to Fritschy, & Fred Gray - I desire both to write to me - Nat you also my dear comrade, & tell me all about the boys & everything, all the little items are so good - should Charles Russell visit New York, I wish you to say to him I send him my love - I wish you the same to Perk & to Kingsley & Ben Knower[.] So good bye my comrade till we meet, & God bless you dear friend

Walt

address me, care Major Hapgood. Paymaster USA. [cor?] 15 & [Fr.?] Washington DC